

Chicago Tribune, May 24, 2004

Summer is almost here and that means millions of Chicagoans will make the pilgrimage to Lake Michigan beaches. In too many places, at too many times, they'll find the beaches closed because of high levels of bacteria. There's no way to underestimate the value of the lake to this city. It's a truism that bears repeating: as Lake Michigan goes, so goes Chicago.

Last week came two more pieces of evidence that efforts to clean up Lake Michigan and the other Great Lakes are going too slowly:

- On Tuesday, President Bush created a task force to coordinate federal and state efforts to clean up the Great Lakes. But here's the catch: the new task force needs until March to study the problems and make recommendations.
- A day earlier, Mayor Richard Daley and other officials declared that they would back a renewed push to convince the state to apply for millions of dollars in federal grants from a program called Coastal Zone Management. But again, another catch: The governor is studying whether or not the state can afford it.

Let's make this simple.

There are no good excuses for not doing these things. Now. Let's stop the studying and start acting. "We already know what problems are facing the Great Lakes," says U.S. Rep. Rahm Emanuel (D-Ill.). "We're too long on studies and too short on resources."

He's right. First, the Bush administration should get behind a bill, sponsored by Emanuel and U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) to give states \$4 billion in grants over five years to fight invasive species, pollution and other problems in the Great Lakes. Separately, the Blagojevich administration should join 34 other states and territories that already tap into the Coastal Zone program to preserve beaches, protect wetlands and provide more public access to shoreline recreation.

It isn't complicated. The state should be first in line when the federal government hands out money to improve Lake Michigan. Instead, this state is the only one eligible for the program that's not taking advantage of it. That means that over three decades, the state has snubbed the chance to collect millions. That's astonishing.

In the late 1970s, the opposition to joining the program was led by the late business titan W. Clement Stone and a handful of other North Shore property owners who feared that if Illinois signed up, the federal government would force lakefront property owners to open their private beaches to the public. But supporters of the program now say federal rules are more flexible today to ensure that local governments and property owners still will control their lakefronts.

The federal money could be used for any number of local or state programs, from improving the health of lake beaches to restoring the Waukegan River.

One major snag now appears to be that the state has to match the federal money, up to \$2 million a year. In tight budget times, even a relatively small sum like that can be hard to come by. But some supporters believe that money already being spent by the city and other municipalities on lake projects could be pledged as part or all of the match. That's worth pursuing.

Of even greater importance is the \$4 billion Great Lakes bill introduced last year, which would provide block grants to battle invasive species, control urban and agricultural runoff, and protect critical shoreline and wetlands.

Emanuel points out that the government in the last few years has released at least eight studies on the Great Lakes. Last week's presidential executive order will create a ninth. That's study overkill. What's needed now is swift action to make sure that Lake Michigan and the other Great Lakes remain healthy for the millions of people who use them.